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Secondary School Curriculum  
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Sizer, Theodore R, *Horace's Compromise: The Dilemma of the American High School*, (New York, NY: Mariner Books, 1992).

Originally published in 1984, *Horace's Compromise* by Theodore Sizer is the first in his series of three books dedicated to the issue of educational reform in the United States. In preparing to write the Horace trilogy, Sizer and a group of researchers visited 80 schools over the course of five years. Like *The Paideia Proposal* and *A Nation at Risk*, *Horace's Compromise* was a controversial yet influential treatise on the status of American schools during the 1980s. Today it remains a powerful and insightful commentary on the problems facing our schools as well as the hope for their future.

Theodore Sizer possesses one of the most impressive and respected resumes in American education. A former headmaster of the prestigious Phillips Academy and dean of the Graduate School of Education at Harvard, Dr. Sizer is also chairman of the Coalition of Essential Schools and Professor Emeritus at Brown University.

#### I. *So who is Horace anyway?*

Horace Smith is a fictitious but authentic English teacher at a typical suburban high school. He is a cigarette-smoking, coffee-drinking veteran educator who has seen it all during his 28 years in the classroom. Horace is a master teacher who takes pride in his profession. For him, teaching is a fun and rewarding occupation. Each day he instructs about 120 students in five classes, including one Advanced Placement class, one freshman class, and three junior classes. Mr. Smith also devotes numerous hours after school to the production of school-sponsored plays.

A man of high standards, Horace sees his role as that of a coach who must critically guide the intellectual development of his students. Above all else, he believes in the value of writing. But because of a heavy workload that prevents him from grading papers thoroughly, Horace is forced to make an unfortunate compromise. He must accept the reality that for high school teachers there is “a [chasm] between what would be nice and what is possible... a chasm not crossed by reasonable and judicious judgements” (20).

Horace Smith represents the thousands of conscientious and talented teachers across the United States whose full potential cannot be realized because of the stagnated educational system in which they toil. *Horace’s Compromise* outlines Theodore Sizer’s remedy for American schools.

## II. *Summary*

In the first section of *Horace’s Compromise* Dr. Sizer examines the place of students in American schools. In his view, “American high schools today too readily stress the vulnerability and inexperience of adolescents and underrate the potency and authority that young people can exhibit” (33). Rather than encourage submissiveness, schools must raise expectations and advance the notion that students ought to be active participants in their own learning. Furthermore, school systems and teachers must acknowledge the ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of their students without forgetting that powerful experience shared by all adolescents: puberty. Lastly, Sizer states his conviction that students must be provided with meaningful incentives to take their education seriously.

In the second section of *Horace’s Compromise* the author looks at education as a program. He emphasizes the importance of skill acquisition through coaching, the value of learning as a process of inquiry, and the place of character development. Sizer advocates

abandoning the traditional content-driven course structure in favor of a system of coaching and questioning. He believes that “schools that always insist on the right answer, with no concern as to how a student reaches it, smother the student’s efforts to become an effective intuitive thinker” (105). In other words, how a student arrives at an answer is more important than the answer itself. ForSizer, skills such as reading, writing, and speaking are learned by experience and taught through a process of coaching. These skills, not the regurgitation of facts, should be at the heart of the high school curriculum.

Rigorous self-questioning is important because it forces students to examine their core values and beliefs and ultimately enhances their ability to reason. While recognizing that inquiry is a difficult pedagogy to master, Sizer believes that the good teacher is not afraid to ask the tough questions of his or her students. Discussing and debating social and ethical issues in the relatively controlled environment of the classroom is an important part of a well-rounded secondary education.

One of the primary functions of American schools is to create an informed, responsible, and morally decent citizenry. But how are values best taught in the schools? Sizer says that teaching values like tolerance and generosity is done “largely by example or, better put, by the ‘surround,’ by the insistent influence of the institution itself living out those values” (123). In other words, students must see throughout the school community and in teachers especially, evidence of tolerance and generally decent behavior.

In the third section of his book, Sizer concentrates on the role of teachers in his vision for educational reform. He equates the art of teaching with theatre. In describing the teacher as an actor, Sizer notes that “While the point is to have the students learn, the teacher has to explain, provoke, cajole, inspire, criticize, demand, love. He or she often has to be a ham and to love

being one” (153). Teachers must be innovative and flexible in their methodology, taking into account the needs of individuals as well as that of the class as a whole. They must also possess a lively sense of humor!

Sizer also examines in this section the importance of agreement and motivation in the classroom. Teachers and students must together agree on the goals of their class and the means of attaining those goals. Reaching an agreement however is not an easy process. It requires mutual trust developed over a long period of time. For Sizer, the consequences of not reaching a valid and equitable agreement can be devastating. “Failing to get agreement, and agreement on ends and means that forward serious intellectual activity, however painful, results in an empty school” (160). With respect to motivation, the author believes the key is to provide thoughtful, positive incentives and to encourage student involvement instead of relying on a more traditional system of rewards and punishment. He also addresses the expectations of teachers and the qualities possessed by those who best represent the profession.

In the final section of *Horace’s Compromise*, called “The Structure,” Sizer outlines his five imperatives for better schools. They are:

1. Give room to teachers and students to work and learn in their own, appropriate ways.
2. Insist that students clearly exhibit mastery of their school work.
3. Get the incentives right, for students and for teachers.
4. Focus the students’ work on the use of their minds.
5. Keep the structure simple and thus flexible. (214)

Sizer says that better schools, those in which teachers, students, parents, and administrators work efficiently together toward worthwhile goals, will spring up only when the necessary supporting structures are built.

### III. Analysis and Evaluation

The premise of *Horace's Compromise* is fairly simple. In it, the author argues that America's schools require a major philosophical and structural overhaul and that (good) teachers must play the leading role in that process.Sizer believes that despite the emphasis the American education system places on subject matter, curriculum organization, and assessment, a school will ultimately succeed or fail because of its teachers. This is particularly true of high schools, where good teachers are absolutely necessary to develop students' ability to reason and make sound judgements in an increasingly complex world.

A theme evident throughout *Horace's Compromise* is that "less is more" when it comes to education. Sizer advocates simplifying the curriculum and working at a less hurried pace in order to ensure that there is genuine mastery in our schools. A less complex educational structure fosters the flexibility, creativity, and recognition of diversity necessary to make our schools better. I agree with the author that the decentralization of our schools is imperative. We should empower teachers, principals, and parents as the primary decision-makers rather than allow state legislatures and government bureaucracies to control our schools. "Less is more" ought to be the name of the game when it comes to standardized tests and curricula as well. Mass standardization of our schools only serves to foster the sense distrust that pervades our educational system. High stakes tests do little, if anything, to stimulate genuine intellectual development or transform our students into insightful and responsible adult citizens.

Sizer views formal education as a constantly shifting triangle, the sides of which are formed by students, teachers, and the curriculum. He writes, "that these triangles vary for different people, subjects, and times makes the task of providing constructive schooling an extraordinarily complex and subtle business" (152). I think Dr. Sizer would agree with me that

teachers must be the stabilizing force, the base, of this triangle. The good teacher will constantly adapt his or her teaching style to the changing demands of the curriculum as well as to the changing needs of students. Teaching is in effect a juggling act. Teachers must balance the expectations of their students with those of administrators, parents, and curriculum writers while at the same time remaining true to their own beliefs about the art and science of teaching.

Today “character education” in American schools is a volatile political topic, even though instruction in principles of common decency has always been a function of our public school system. With many Americans bemoaning the moral decay of our nation, schools have become the focus of intense media and government scrutiny. All too often schools are viewed as the problem rather than as part of the solution. While I believe that family, religion, and community ought to provide the majority of a child’s moral education, schools must also play a part. Like Dr.Sizer, I think that meaningful character education in the schools must begin with teachers. First and foremost, a teacher must be a good role model. He or she must possess the traits we desire to instill in our children. In today’s society the sad reality is that teachers are often the only positive role models that students can ever hope to emulate. Moreover, it is absolutely essential that the school as a whole provide a positive sense of community.

Many of the author’s ideas closely parallel those of Mortimer Adler. In fact, in *Horace’s Compromise*Sizer makes several direct references to *The Paideia Proposal*. For example, in his analysis of curriculum and pedagogy, Dr. Sizer refers to the distinctions Adler makes between skills, knowledge, and understanding. Furthermore, both men seem to agree that the standardization of curricula has been detrimental to the success of American schools because it has, among other things, made teachers virtually powerless. In order to reverse this trend, they call for the simplification and decentralization of our educational system. Finally, Adler and

Sizer apparently share the notion that there are no unteachable children. There are only teachers and school systems that fail to reach these so-called “throw away” youngsters. This is perhaps the most important lesson to be learned by teachers tempted to make the same compromise as Horace.